

## **Identity, destiny and terrorism:**

### **The effect of social terror on identity formation<sup>1</sup>**

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In his opening remarks, Dr. Akhtar explained that where and under what circumstances people grow up makes a profound difference in shaping their personality. He underscored how psychoanalysis, by virtue of its expanded exploration of elements beyond the impact of the immediate family, has become a much richer and more textured discipline. Alluding to the difference between the kinds of anxiety associated with times of crisis as opposed to times of prosperity and peace, he stressed the role of generational transmission of anxiety or any prevalent mood or affects in large groups and its profound hidden or explicit effect on children. Therefore, what's in the air is not always what is said but what is *not* said. These mixtures of what is said and not said then generate the volatility that can create group destiny and identity which is the subject of the panel.

The first speaker, Vamik Volkan, began his psychopolitical presentation by pointing out the importance of studying large group identity, which, alongside an individual's core identity, links him to millions of others within an ethnic, national or large group. To dramatize the workings of a large group identity, he compared the aftermath of two scenarios. First, he had the audience imagine Jack the Ripper striking in Rio and being caught, tried and incarcerated. He remarked that, after a while, he would be forgotten and that there would be no more talk about him. He then reminded the audience of the impact of Slobodan Milošević on the whole of Serbian society and how in contrast his scar will remain forever. Something, then, within society can be used for massive violence which does not belong to the individual. In this case, it was the reactivation of former grievances of the Serbs. Milošević inflamed the Serbs' 'chosen trauma' (Volkan, 1999). In order to reactivate that trauma, the 600 year-old bodies of three leaders were dug out and put in coffins and carried from one village to another for a whole year. This would guarantee that the schoolchildren would know about the battle of Kosovo in the 14th century. Therefore, when members of a large group are unable to mourn their loss and humiliation, they pass on the images of their injured selves and object images of those who hurt them to their offspring. The study of these societal processes

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<sup>1</sup>Panel held at the 44th Congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 30 July 2005. Panelists: Vamik Volkan (Charlottesville, VA); Abigail Golomb (Tel Aviv); Geneviève Welsh-Jouve (Paris).

then becomes very crucial, since terrorists are the tool of the societal process. He emphasized that large group identity is not something that one is aware of until there is a crisis. Using the analogy of a tent, he compared the core group identity to the pole at the core of the tent whose main purpose is to support the canvas (the large group identity) and prevent it from collapsing. If it is shaken and the tent collapses, i.e. if the large group identity is disintegrated, repairing and maintaining that collective identity becomes a primary task for everyone. In the aftermath of intergroup fighting, rituals are established as large groups try to keep their identities distinct from each other (e.g. the shared specificity of the tent's canvas with its own unique historical memory painted on it); in this way, they begin to see others through externalizations and projections as less than human. One such ritual is an obligatory process of purification which intensifies the group identity by eliminating its unwanted aspects. By purifying themselves they reestablish their identity. For example, this is how Greece, after a lifelong coexistence with Turkey, became a nation in 1830. Volkan concluded that the specificity of the large group process and the way its members go about formalizing it constitute the large group identity.

Abigail Golomb then examined the effects of growing up in cultures where free choice and experimentation are repudiated, and ingrained ideologies are transmitted to the next generation very early on. She focused on the impact of such indoctrination on the developmentally vulnerable psyche of children for whom strangers, or any perceived other, evoke aversion. Because this affect is an immediate visceral response (as opposed to the intellectual rationalizations of ordinary prejudice), it is experienced as something factual or grounded in empirical reality. Drawing on a few examples, such as the myth of cowboys and Indians (where the Indians are cast as bad guys, as though they were the ones who stole the land), she argued that these myths, without any correspondence to historical fact, create concrete heroes to admire and to hate as they eventually become part of the individual's concept of the world. In our time, since terror is random, it defies the child's processing of the world and his need for comprehension, which are based on the perception of cause and effect. Thus, in response to the senseless act of terror, the child integrates the concept of the terrorist as a faceless bad guy in order to deal with it at a later age, but is left with an emotional price tag. Identifying with the aggressor or assuming a victim identity and creating one's own distorted story are preferred psychological options to accepting no explanations for the senselessness of the situation. Fantasies of becoming a terrorist or a suicide bomber are examples of how aggression pervades the fabric of the child's personality in order to compensate for the sense of helplessness vis-à-vis their conditions. Such defenses that privilege hating the other over not understanding his *raison d'être*, combined with a desensitization to everyday violence, give rise to an ideology that either trivializes or condones killing. The child is indoctrinated and absorbs such ideologies throughout his development. Dr. Golomb made the interesting point that, unlike children of conventional war, these children, with their matter-of-fact attitude and immunity toward violence, are caught up in the cycle of using aggression not just as a solution to their problems but also to protect their psychological self (Fonagy et al., 1993). Aggression then becomes an intrinsic part of their personality and the ensuing culture of hatred does not leave room for reconciliation.

The last speaker, Geneviève Welsh-Jouve, provided case material to demonstrate the effect of intergenerational transmission of trauma on the identity of a female patient with a frozen psychic life. The patient's adaptation to the transmission of these past traumas suffered during the Holocaust by her family constituted neither of the usual reactions of being drawn to or fleeing from the trauma; instead, she was left with the legacy of a frozen psyche, merged with a disturbed dead mother. The analyst's processing of her own countertransference set off by the patient's unconscious attempt to confuse the analyst with her genealogy allowed the analyst to interpret how the patient's identity was compromised by the loss and disruption of intergenerational boundaries. Thus, the first order of business, which was to separate the dead from the living, clarify the names and restore the intergenerational boundaries, proved to be crucial in releasing the patient from the frozen state of her merged identification with a literally and figuratively dead mother. Finally, dream analysis and the analyst's provision of developmental work allowed the necessary change toward the gradual unleashing of the patient's own identity despite the heavy inheritance of trauma from three generations.

After summing up the panel's different multidisciplinary, developmental and intergenerational perspectives on the effect of social terror on identity, Dr. Akhtar opened the panel to the floor. A fundamental question about the usefulness of the word 'terrorist' in our psychoanalytic discussion was raised. Dr. Akhtar acknowledged that this choice of vocabulary does indeed raise a number of problems, pointing out that the label of terrorist can describe many things. For instance, we do not talk about the politically motivated murder of Iraqis in terms of terrorism, just as we tend to focus on 'terrorism' of the poor without acknowledging that the more privileged classes can be victims of the very same acts of 'terrorism.' Moreover, since all labels of this sort are loaded with political agendas, the label of terrorist, he conceded, is not a good psychoanalytic term. Dr. Welsh-Jouve corroborated this point by adding that some patients can experience an inner terrorist and others can develop a terrorism of suffering. Furthermore, she noted that, after 9/11, she had two patients who identified with the terrorists because they had so much hatred within themselves.

Finally, on a more amusing note, a member of the audience from Russia challenged the panelists' emphasis on splitting in the notion of 'us' against 'them' as outsiders, dominant in large group identity. She indicated that, for most people in Russia, the enemy is from within, that is, Putin is an insider and not an outsider!

### References

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